

Bulletproof and reckless

*Stupid human tricks
are major contributors
to top 10 causes
of AF fatal mishaps*

by Tech. Sgt. Elaine Wilson
photo by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

John Phillips, Chief of Air Force Ground Safety, has seen some strange safety mishaps during his 20+ year safety career. Some bordered on the bizarre. Others were just mildly surprising.

"Unfortunately a lot of our people are dying because of stupid things," said Mr. Phillips. "Often they think they're bulletproof, or maybe they just don't care. Many fatal accidents are just people making poor personal risk management decisions."

The military had a rash of fatal mishaps in fiscal 2004. Concerned, the focus shifted to promoting education and safety campaigns. The effort paid off. After a string of "bad years," to date, the Air Force is seeing an end to the losing streak with a 50 percent cut in fatalities.

Mr. Phillips attributes the turnaround to leadership, from generals to front-line supervisors.

"Commanders are getting creative, coming up with programs to raise

awareness," he said. "And supervisors are getting more involved with their troops' lives. You wouldn't let your 18-year-old daughter or son take off for the weekend without discussing safety. Why wouldn't you at least extend some of that courtesy to your troops?"

Safety officials hope the 101 Critical Days of Summer campaign — from Memorial Day through Labor Day — will re-emphasize the safety messages and prevention tips. Some so obvious they border on "no-brainers."

"Sometimes a reminder or a 'hey, that's not a good idea' is all it takes to save a life," he said.

Here are the top 10 causes of fatal mishaps in the Air Force:

1. Speeding or driving too fast for conditions. While many people seem to ease off the gas on base, good habits seem to fly out the window when they drive out the gate. Before the base even hits the rearview mirror, people speed up and "disengage common sense."

Mr. Phillips recalls a story about two Airmen who had a bad run-in with a trailer — literally. The Airmen backed a competition drag racer out of a 20-foot trailer to perform maintenance. One of the Airman climbed in and, without a helmet or seatbelt, revved the engine. He hit the starter and released it.

"The racer took off like a rocket," said Herm Dean, Air Force Chief of Ground Safety Operations. It hit the trailer, lifting it off the ground. When car and trailer eventually slid to a halt, the "driver" hit the trailer headfirst. That was his last joy ride.

2. Failure to comply with traffic laws (other than speeding). Tailgating is a big culprit in many mishaps. The closer you get, the less opportunity you have to avoid an accident. He recommends a two-second rule if conditions are good, and four-second rule if towing a trailer or if conditions are poor. Drivers should also avoid speeding up to make a yellow light.

"If you're speeding through an

intersection at 50 to 60 mph and get hit, someone isn't walking away," Mr. Phillips said.

3. Driving beyond your skill level. Motorcycle drivers have a tough time with this one, particularly in the spring or early summer when "0 down" is the catch phrase. They spring for high performance bikes way out of their league. "Young drivers start out with a Honda 250, drive them for a while and then bump up to a Kawasaki 1000," said Mr. Dean. "The curbs and corners get them. They don't have the ability to match the bike's performance." The Air Force is working to decrease these kinds of accidents, making motorcycle safety courses mandatory for every Airman who drives one.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John Jumper's motorcycle mentor program is also catching on. This pairs experienced and inexperienced riders before they head out on the highway.

4. Drinking and driving under the influence. This is as close to a "no-brainer" as you can get. If you drink, don't drive — find a designated driver. Seems simple, but when drinking, people's judgment seems to decrease at the same rate as their brain cells.

One Airman at a northern tier base got drunk, confrontational and stormed angrily out of a party. His friends blew it off, figured he'd eventually be back. That was the last time they saw him. He passed out in the woods and froze to death. At another base, an Airman took off drunk, rode his motorcycle down Route 66 and decided to pop a wheelie — at 100 mph. He also died.

"This kind of thing happens over and over," Mr. Phillips said. "Don't let someone walk away when they're upset. Take care of one another."

5. Driving fatigued. With limited time and funds, some Airmen forego a pricey ticket and take marathon drives to see family or friends. One couple drove 400 miles, visited friends for a day and a half, then drove back home. Arriving at 10 p.m., they packed until 1 a.m., slept two hours, and drove

another 200 miles so the wife could catch a plane. The husband made it a mile from the airport on his way home before he fell asleep, drove through a stop sign and killed himself.

Mr. Phillips said, "People fall asleep, just for a moment, and run off the shoulder." Sometimes they wake up abruptly and overcorrect left or right and get in trouble. Supervisors can help Airmen work out a pre-departure plan that allows for rest and the flexibility to call if they get behind.

6. Distracted by non-driving tasks. Technology contributes to mishaps, too. When people phased out cassettes in favor of CDs, they scored better sound — but also a better chance for an accident. CDs are a big problem because people often must fumble, both hands off the wheel, to get a CD out of a package. "You could open a cassette case with one hand," Mr. Phillips said.

Cell phones are another problem. Statistics show someone talking on a cell phone while driving is "as bad as if driving drunk," he said. As of this month, the Defense Department plans to prohibit cell phone use while driving on any military installation, unless the person is using a hands-free set. The Air Force may take it a step further, and is looking at outlawing hands-free usage while driving, as well, Mr. Phillips said. Personal digital devices, movie watching and mapping systems are other troublemakers.

"You're traveling 81 feet in one second at 55 mph," Mr. Phillips said. "You don't have to be distracted very long to cause major damage."

7. Driving without appropriate protective equipment.

Another no-brainer. Airmen on motorcycles must use helmets when driving on or off base. Civilians must use helmets on base. All military people, regardless of rank, must also wear seatbelts.

"I once saw a major go up to a 'two-star' who wasn't wearing his seatbelt and give him a lecture about the example he was setting," Mr. Phillips said. While laws vary from state to state for accountability, in a government vehicle, the senior person, whether driving or not, is responsible for everyone's seatbelt use.

8. Boating under the influence or without training. Driving a boat is no different than driving a car — driving drunk is against the law. But as the heat rises, people pack up coolers and head to the lake or sea. "But then they start drinking and run over a jet skier or engage the prop while someone is getting ready to ski," Mr. Phillips said. Some accidents result from inexperience. Others from alcohol-impaired judgment. And although people need a license to fish, they don't need one to drive a boat. It's up to the drivers to get educated through a state- or town-run program or from the Coast Guard, which offers free boat safety courses.

9. Swimming under the influence or beyond limitations.

Two Airmen in Japan decided, though prohibited, to dive from a cliff known for dangerous cliff-diving accidents. A summertime swim turned deadly when one Airman dove in and got caught in the tide. His buddy jumped in to save him and both drowned. The same fate can happen to rafters, tubers or boaters.

"People may not be as strong a swimmer as they think," Mr. Phillips said.

Combine limited ability with a generous portion of alcohol, and it spells t-r-o-u-b-l-e. Even fishing at sea, which seems failsafe, can be deadly if people are catching more beer than fish and aren't paying attention to obstacles in the water.

10. Not wearing an approved personal flotation device during water sports. The same people who may not know how to operate a boat are probably not aware of the requirements for flotation devices, which vary according to number of people and type of boat. Mr. Phillips highly recommends the use of flotation devices when involved in water sports such as jet skiing. ♡

Want more info?

For more on the 101 Critical Days of Summer or safety programs, visit the Air Force Safety Center Web site at <http://afsafety.kirtland.af.mil/> or contact your local safety office.

